

The street kids of Suva. Are they problems or people facing challenges?

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INTRODUCTION

Research objectives

This paper is about a group of young boys and men living in Suva, the capital of the Fiji Islands, who I got to know over a period of four months in 2003/2004. They lack formal accommodation, work in the informal sector and have limited or no contact with parents and relatives. People in Fiji refer to them as street kids. Many of them work as shoe shiners and therefore they are also called shoeshine boys.

I aim to shed some light on the reasons why they are street kids. The boys caught my imagination because they live different lives than most people in Fiji. I was interested in finding out why they chose or were forced to live lives that for me seemed so hard and unprotected. The “why question” is a big one to ask. It is impossible to detail all structural factors contributing to the outcome. All I can do is communicate what the boys told me and then place their stories into a social context.

I assumed in advance that because the boys live differently they would to some degree be considered as outsiders by other people in the city. I was therefore interested in how they were perceived and portrayed. My main focus in this regard is on how they are portrayed and dealt with by the authorities as authors and executors of policy. I will detail how the street kids are treated and how this affects their lives.

Children and young people in human geography

A growing number of academic works concerning children, young people and geography have been published since the 1970s (Holloway and Valentine 2000). The works can be divided into three streams, each of which makes a valuable contribution to the body of research on children and young people.

Firstly, human geographers' focus on space and place draws attention to the variations in how children and childhood are perceived across the globe. Since the 1970s a new school of social scientists has taken a critical look at children as a socially defined category. They argue that what it means to be a child will vary according to time and place. One idea that I will return to in this paper is that childhood as a protected sphere distinct from adulthood is a relatively new and western concept.

Secondly, human geographers draw lines between ideas on children, young people and place. Researchers find that society views certain spaces as appropriate for young people and others as unsuitable. "Street" and "child" is often considered a poor match, be it because the street can be a dangerous place for the child or because adolescent kids in groups are considered a menace by adults who share the streets with them. Society's ambivalent attitude illustrates that two conflicting notions of children exist side by side, namely children as angels and devils. On one hand, children are viewed as unruly and yet to be socialised into ordered and civilized behaviour. On the other, children are seen as pure, innocent and yet to be soiled

by adult life. Dramatic wording aside, the contradictory images of children as angels and devils can shed some light on why street and child may be viewed as incongruous. Societies' attitudes to children and young people in public space are a major theme in this paper. I hope to show that out of attitudes actions are born and that these actions can have significant consequences for the lives of and young people.

Thirdly, human geographers contribute with studies of everyday spaces where young people's identities are created and recreated. Human geographers study children and young people's access, use and connection to the street and to public places in general. Their works show that young people's identities are formed in the context of place. These ideas will be discussed more thoroughly in coming chapters.

Most of the geographical works on children and young people that I was able to access are focused on Western children. Across the two anthologies that I consulted only three of 35 chapters were based on research from non-Western countries (Skelton & Valentine 1997, Holloway & Valentine 2000). I hope this paper will shed further light on the experiences of non-Western children and young people.

Looking at street children in particular, there are two works presented in the anthologies. One looks at homeless youth in Los Angeles and the other at street children in Indonesia (Ruddick 1997, Beazley 2000). Street children have a different relationship to public space than the rest of us. Not only do they play and hang out in public space, they also work and sleep there. The difficulty for them is that they are often told to leave without having anywhere to go.

This makes discussions on “the incongruity of children and street” as well as “identity formation in the context of place” all the more interesting.

Social relevance and transferability

This paper is not only a study about the treatment of street children in Suva. It is about how we respond to those who are different, how we deal with those we perhaps would rather not see, whether we are in Fiji, Australia or Norway. For this reason I believe the social relevance of this paper goes beyond the Fijian community.

The interpretations in this paper are transferable to other research that looks at how vulnerable people are portrayed and dealt with; especially, but not only, those who are so obviously in the public eye. My interpretations and insights into why street kids are portrayed in a particular way and how these portraits legitimise specific actions aimed at them can hopefully inspire other researchers, who are working with different groups and in different contexts, who are interested in these issues.

Notes on “street children” as a concept

Different authors can refer to groups of children with different characteristics when talking about street children. This may pose challenges for those attempting to compare studies of street children (Glauser 1997, Hutz and Koller 1999). Definitions of street children sometimes embrace *all* children who spend most of their time on the street. Researchers may in such cases choose to differentiate between children who live at home and work on the streets and those children who actually live on the streets. The point to consider is that many children don't necessarily fit neatly into either category. Many move backwards and forwards between home, institutions and the street for varying periods and different reasons.

Glauser (1997) reminds us that becoming a street child is a process. Initially the child might spend an occasional night on the street. He or she might then graduate to spending more and more time away from home; regardless of the amount of time spent away separation from the home need not be complete.

To reduce the potential for confusion Hutz and Koller (1999) emphasize the importance of thoroughly describing the street child population that you are referring to, after first getting to know the local people and context. I will describe the Suva street kids and their context in an upcoming chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why are they street children?

The most basic question when discussing street children is “why are they street children?” I will in the following section attempt to shed light on the reasons why children are pressured or choose to become street children. One of the academics presented in this literature review more surprisingly also ask the opposite question; why do so many children remain at home? A third question to be discussed is: “How different are the circumstances of street children compared to those who live at home?”

A survey studying “urban children in distress” in different countries has attempted to explain why children become street children (Blanc 1994). Unsurprisingly the researchers found that urban children in distress, street children included, must be understood in a broad context. A country’s position in the world economy, income distribution within the country, social policy, political stability or unrest and urbanisation rates are all factors. Family factors play an important part too. In Italy, the only western country in the survey, family relationships is a more determining factor than socio-economic status. In all countries children whose parents have divorced are more likely to become street children as are those who have experienced abuse. Many street children’s families are first generation city dwellers who after moving to town are more vulnerable to divorce

and weakened ties with the extended family. Blanc emphasizes that explanations for why children and young people turn to the streets must be sought at all geographic levels. Higher level processes have consequences for lower levels i.e. a country's position in the world economy will influence the economic situation of families living in the country. Such connections between higher and lower geographic levels also apply both to street children and to other urban children in distress.

Beazley (2000) describes how a development strategy intended to increase the wealth of Indonesia contributed to an increased number of street children in Indonesia. The government's strategy was to better integrate the country into the global economy. However, the difference between poor and rich grew and millions of Indonesians were excluded in the process. The pressures on families were great and this ultimately led to an increase in the number of street children. The urbanisation rate also increased as a consequence of the strategy and this further added to the number of children and young people on the streets. A national strategy with global ambitions had very real consequences for the lives of children and families.

Veale et al. (2000) agree that macro level factors contribute to pressuring children out of the home and onto the street. However, they warn against a tendency toward determinism and victimisation in literature on street youth and children. Street life must not be portrayed as an unavoidable consequence of the poverty-spiral. Nor should assumptions be made about poor people lacking the capacity to self manage or having self destructive tendencies. Such depictions pacify both children and parents. Veale et al. dismiss the idea of

linking street youth to a culture of poverty marked by fatalism and helplessness. They claim that researchers don't always understand the actions and circumstances of the people they make assumptions about. Parents' apparent abandonment and neglect of children who work on the streets can for example be a strategy to make their children independent and capable. They further argue that the children who actually live on the streets do not necessarily come from the poorest families. Abuse rather than poverty is for Veale et al. the factor most likely to determine why children become street children.

Veale et al. (2000) to some extent look at street children from a rational choice perspective. Often the children themselves make the decision to leave home based on what appears to be a rational choice at the time. However, they warn against taking this perspective too far. Children make their choices in the context of their home and local environments. The "leaving" threshold will for example depend on the level of violence they experience in the home. Massey (1994) reminds us that the positive stereotype of "home as safe haven" unfortunately is out of line with many people's experience. The home can be a place of oppression and violence, and by comparison the streets can represent freedom.

Home versus street

We have in a previous section seen that there are several ways to define street children and that some definitions lack precision. The following definition has been adopted by organisations such as UNICEF:

“Street children are those for whom the street more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults” (Hecht 1998, 96).

Hecht points out some weaknesses in this definition. What for example constitutes “protection” or a “responsible adult”, he asks. Hecht concerns himself with comparing the plight of street children with that of other poor children. He finds that many children living at home do not have the protection of responsible adults. In this regard the circumstances of some children who remain at home may not be so different from those who have chosen the street. Street children’s experiences once they are on the streets are no doubt different, but the variables that influence them to choose the street also affect other children. Poverty, violence and lack of opportunity are experiences that are common to both children at home and those on the street, as well as their respective families.

In fact Hecht (1998) goes on to suggest that instead of asking why there are street children in the world we should be asking why more children do not run away from home. By leaving home many children could escape their parents’ abuse and avoid having to share their income with them. Hecht answers the question himself by referring to what Marxist researchers describe as “the moral economy”. The moral economy is marked by mutual responsibilities between family and community members. Focusing on Brazil, Hecht argues that children are part of the moral economy and therefore do not feel free to run off. Instead they feel they have a part to play in keeping the family together and contributing to the household economically. Hecht found that Brazilian children who did leave

home felt a great deal of guilt for failing to live up to this perceived responsibility.

Baker and Panter-Brick (2000) like Hecht (1998) see the importance of viewing street children in a larger context. Their study from Nepal focuses on both street children and children living at home. They note that work and migration are natural parts of life for many young people in Nepal, not just street kids. It is traditional for young boys to leave home and seek employment around the age of 12. Improved transportation and communications have provided new opportunities in cities further away from home.

Going away to live and work on the city streets rarely represents a final break with the family. Nepal's street kids often visit their family. Baker and Panter-Brick (2000) argue that any stigma felt by street kids in Nepal is not caused by the common act of moving away from home, but rather by the unacceptable behaviour that sometimes accompanies street life. Baker and Panter-Brick tentatively divide the street kids into three groups based on their contact with family:

- Those who temporarily live on the streets whose family agree that the arrangement is for the time being only;
- "The exiled" who are welcome home if they improve their behaviour;
- The permanent street children who cannot or do not want to return home.

Child, family, state – who is abandoning whom?

Baker and Panter-Brick (2000) argue that talking in terms of abandonment is misleading when discussing street kids in Nepal. They find that street kids in Nepal in general do not feel abandoned by their families. Further to this, abandonment cuts both ways. Often it can be unclear who is giving up on whom and difficult to determine the extent to which kids choose or are forced to move away. Instead, Baker and Panter Brick suggest that the street kids have a sense of being abandoned by societal structures rather than their families. They claim that it is easier for politicians and researchers to focus on street children rather than on structural inequalities that concern all poor people.

Montgomery (2000) makes similar arguments in her paper regarding child prostitutes from a Thai slum community. Politicians, journalists and researchers tend to focus on negligent parents, abusive relatives and evil sex tourists when discussing child prostitution. This focus can trigger emotional reactions to the issue while overlooking more complex explanations. Montgomery argues that this allows the state to express dissatisfaction with the situation without really acting on the issue. The focus on dysfunctional individuals may help free the state of responsibility. Focusing on families and customers may well serve to cover up the underlying causes of child prostitution in Thailand. This includes what Montgomery characterises as modernity without growth that offers limited opportunities for the poor. According to her, parents have not abandoned children to the same extent as the state has.

Beazley (2000) also notes that the Indonesian media portray street children as the end result of poor parenting. Structural and economic factors fail to get the same media attention as subjects such as lazy parents sending their children out on the streets to work.

Street children as symbols

Hecht (1998) argues that street children get a lot of attention in what he describes as the market place of social problems. This is because they function as symbols in larger debates taking place between journalists, academics and non government organisations. Hecht's concern is that this focus on street children distracts attention from socio economic structures that oppress children whether they live at home or on the streets.

Hecht (1998) further claims that estimates from various child protection agencies on how many street children there are in the world or in particular countries tend to be greatly exaggerated. Numbers can be difficult to determine because it is hard to differentiate street children from other poor city children. In addition their high mobility and lack of address can create additional uncertainty. Further to this, Hecht argues that the exaggerations can be attributed to poor statistical skills combined with well-meaning attempts from various child protection agencies to draw attention to the issue. Modern western ideas about childhood have spread to the middle classes on all continents, including through the work of

agencies such as Save the Children and UNICEF (Boyden 1997). The United Nation's Declaration of Children's Rights is according to Boyden framed very much by the ideals of a western protected childhood. She argues that researchers and aid agencies fail to appreciate geographic and cultural variation and that this discriminates against poor and low income children and their families. She argues that for many children work can be the best preparation for adult life and a more realistic option than the type of education programs that are often promoted as the pill against poverty by welfare agencies.

Critical academics suggest that some aid organisations, in an effort to support their predefined ideas on children and the family, victimise street children unnecessarily (Boyden 1997, Ennew 1997). Panter-Brick (1997) argues that aid organisations compile reports that systematically ignore empirical findings indicating that street children's physical growth and mortality rates match those of poor children living at home. These empirical studies show that poverty rather than homelessness is the primary issue. Contrast this with many media reports that portray street children as wild and morally depraved. Once again, such perceptions do not match the findings of empirical studies (Boyden 1997). These show that street children organise themselves in groups and hierarchies, display great independence and creativity in their day to day living and share solidarity with their friends.

I will in the following section have a closer look at how street children as a group fall outside of society's perception of normality and what the consequences are for street children's lives.

Street children as deviants

Street children live very different lives compared to the ideal western childhood, which I mentioned has spread to middle classes on all continents (Boyden 1997). They face multiple threats including exploitative labour practices, drug use, discrimination, violence and harassment while lacking the protection of adults. They therefore represent the antithesis to the ideal of a happy, protected and innocent childhood (Glauser 1997). They share this reality with numerous children around the world. Many young ones face hardships inside and outside of the home; they are not treated nicely and do not benefit from a nurturing family environment. All these children can be said to be deviations from the ideal protected childhood. Street children are more visible evidence that things are not as we would like them to be.

Beazley (2000) notes that street children do not fit in with the collective orientation of Javanese society either. People in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, believe that street children have been abandoned by their families. Beazley argues that these assumptions actually add to the street children's stigma. Traditionally each person's status in Java is based on his or her relationship to family and kin. The street children appear to have no such ties, and this contributes to their low status.

Street children fall outside both western ideas about childhood and traditional Javanese ideas on family and kin.

In much the same way as western concepts on childhood have been adopted by the middle classes across continents, so too have ideas on privacy (Boyden 1997). Street children find themselves on the wrong side of the fence dividing private and public space. Living on the streets is considered a deviant way of living and in this regard street kids have an atypical relationship to public space.

People tend to have ambivalent feelings toward the city. The city is a dirty, crime ridden and dangerous place. Cities are characterised by density and the urban dweller is exposed to those who are richer, poorer or otherwise different. The city of Los Angeles provides an often quoted example of how the middle classes, in fear of the violent, the poor and the black, turn their houses into fortresses. Los Angeles is a somewhat extreme example, but the same tendencies are apparent in other cities around the world. Despite this, street children have a tendency to operate across socio-economic and racial divides (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998). They do not keep to the slums or ghettos. On the contrary they seek out the more affluent touristy areas to make money in informal sector employment. Again, street children are more visible than other poor people.

Calls for action – what to do with street children?

In a previous chapter I mentioned that human geographers draw lines between ideas on children and space, and that there is a discourse mismatch between “children” on the one hand and “street” on the

other. People often feel sorry for street children who live such unprotected lives. Paradoxically, many also feel intimidated by street kids, not least when they go from being little children to reaching adolescence. The street can be viewed as a dangerous place for children. Alternatively a group of street savvy children can be perceived as a danger to the rest of us on the street. Either way, street and children is a bad match.

This incongruity is manifested in the way authorities around the world deal with street children. On one hand society wants to help the street children and give them their childhood back. On the other they are dangers that need to be controlled or removed. According to Hecht (1998), most organisations aiming to help Brazilian street children do so under the mantra “the street is no place for children”. The various aid efforts are in different ways based on moral ideas of how childhood should be. While international NGOs aim to provide a western, nurtured childhood for the street children, their Brazilian counterparts aim to provide them with training and work placement programs in traditional low-income professions.

Glauser (1997) argues that the authorities and media are more concerned with what street kids do to society than with the needs of the street kids themselves. The street kids disturb normality and stability, and often there are calls in the media to remove them from the streets. Further to this, lack of resources in poorer countries can lead to the police and courts becoming executors of policy. In this way there can be a disproportionate focus on correction at the expense of welfare and prevention (Boyden 1997).

Brazil has received a lot of attention for its street children. In particular the country's death squads have been a focus of attention for their terrible treatment of street children. Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman (1998) argue that the erosion of the military's influence on the Brazilian state was accompanied by an increase in brutality directed toward street children. The authoritarian structures of the military state had kept the poor away from the rich, while the democratisation process brought them together:

"the favelas ruptured, and poor, mostly black, and aggressively needy children descended from the hillside slums and seemed to be everywhere, occupying boulevards, plazas and parks that more affluent citizens once thought of as their own " (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998, 353).

The irony is that the street children's situation appears to have deteriorated following the introduction of more democratic rule, which placed greater emphasis on children's rights. The increased interaction between rich and poor has in Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman's (1998) eyes triggered an increase in purification strategies directed towards Brazilian street children.

Beazley (1998) argues that Yogyakarta's street children represent a challenge to Indonesia's development policy. The family's contribution to this development is to raise new generations of Indonesian citizens and consumers. In this regard the authorities view the family as one pillar of a strong and wealthy Indonesia. The existence of street children indicates that the Indonesian family, and hence the development strategy, is not always working as the government would like.

The government's response to the challenge involuntarily posed by the street children is to issue a range of measures aimed at eradicating the perceived problem. Beazley (1998) goes on to say that the police regularly target the street children. They have been known to confiscate and destroy the street children's possessions, using violence and torture in the process. I will in the following section outline how such actions influence street children's sense of self.

Exclusion, identity and space

The actions outlined above represent attempts to exclude street children in Brazil and Indonesia from public space. Massey (1998) argues that people try to dominate and define the identity of others by controlling space. What this can mean is that dominant groups give some people access to specific places while attempting to exclude others. Massey goes on to say that whether you are welcome or not in particular areas influences how you perceive yourself and are perceived by others. It is therefore correct to say that the regulation of space is closely connected to identity. Wardhaugh (2000) notes that an ancient, common and simple form of exclusion is the banning of unwanted populations from particular places. Excluding people physically from a place may seem to be a milder way of achieving your end than say imprisonment, but Wardhaugh argues that such exclusion represents a sustained attack on one's sense of self. In this

regard spatial exclusion serves to reinforce and perpetuate the stigmatisation of particular identities.

Massey (1998) argues that these attempts at exclusion are part of on-going efforts to establish one's own behaviour as normal or natural while restricting alternative behaviour by others. An interesting counterpoint to this is made by Sibley (1995) who notes that there is always room for resistance by those who are excluded. They don't have to accept the stigma that is attached to them. This is parallel to Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and resistance (Jackson 1989). Hegemony for him is the power that a dominant group has to make others accept their moral, political and cultural values as the natural order of the day. However, hegemony for Gramsci is never total; where there is power there is also resistance. Subordinate groups will fight the dominant groups' attempts to control. Their resistance can be subtle and symbolic, and may well be expressed through a subculture.

Earlier in the paper I mentioned that human geographers have been preoccupied with how children and young people's identities form in relation to space. It is not surprising that this also applies to street children. Beazley (2000) writes that street children in Yogyakarta have created their own subculture with distinguishable values, beliefs and language. The street children's identities are formed in the context of place. They attach themselves to places which have meaning to them, where they feel a sense of belonging and security, and where they can celebrate their distinctiveness or "differentness" from mainstream Javanese society. Beazley notes that in reality the street children's places are often raided by the police and are far from safe. Despite

this, the sense of belonging and feeling that “this is our place” can still create a sense of emotional safety.

New street children are gradually socialised into this culture with its emphasis on freedom and independence. Visible identification tags that mark individuals as belonging to this culture can include such things as ear rings and tattoos. By adopting such practices, the values and expressions of street children’s culture can challenge the norms and rules of the dominant Javanese society in a very obvious way. Becoming part of the street culture can therefore make it even more difficult for children to go back to the home they left. The values, skills and cultural capital of street culture are not necessarily appreciated at home or by mainstream society. Still, belonging to this culture can assist the children to deflect the stigma attached to being a street child. Street culture adds coolness to being alternative, and this helps the children feel comfortable with being different from others.

Of course this culture does not provide an impenetrable shield against feeling stigmatised. Street culture and the dominant culture exist side by side and the street children are constantly exposed to two sets of values. Beazley (1998) notes that many street children took the values of dominant society to heart and started to wish that they were like everybody else. This was particularly the case as they grew bigger and reached puberty. Beazley ascribes this to the fact that adolescent street youth get less sympathy from locals compared with the little ones. Their size could also lead to them being viewed as threats. In addition they can get increased and unwanted attention from the police. These factors contribute toward making it more difficult for the

older and bigger youth to make a living on the streets. Beazley found that many older street youth in Yogyakarta started viewing themselves with the eyes of mainstream society and lost the sense of pride that they had previously found in street culture.

Ruddick (1997) makes a similar argument to Beazley when she writes that marginalised groups search for an identity that makes them feel good about themselves and defies the stigma attached to them. Like Beazley she places this identity construction in the context of place. She writes about a group of young people in Los Angeles in the 1980s who lacked formal housing. They squatted in middleclass suburbs, frequented beaches, popular city hang outs and music clubs at night. They viewed themselves as part of a subculture and identified as punks. They did not see themselves in terms of being homeless or runaways from home.

Ruddick (1997) observed that maintaining this sense of self became increasingly difficult in the context of an increase in spatial purification strategies that the young people were subjected to. More and more frequently the police would chase them away from places where they liked to be and eviction policies became more hard line. Many of the houses they were squatting in were demolished, which meant they had to compete with other groups for marginal space in alleys and parks.

Losing the squats and at the same time being progressively excluded from public spaces lead to a loss of identity. Increasingly they had to accept the assistance of aid agencies that were offering them accommodation and services. These aid agencies defined the

young people as homeless rather than punks. As a result the young people's public identity increasingly became that of homeless youth rather than punks.

Summary – literature review

Most academics presented in this review have studied street children in low or mid-income countries and argue that they come from relatively poor families. One argument has been that the circumstances of street children are not so different from those of other poor children in that both groups can be affected by the same structures and difficult home environments. Despite this, street children hold a special position in public debates because as a group they fall outside our perception of normality. Society's reactions to street children can range from trying to assist them to arresting them, beating them up or even killing them. How a society responds to street children is a reflection of how it perceives them. Hecht wisely writes:

"while I believe it base even harmful, to reduce street children to a problem, the lives of street children in Recife and other Brazilian cities are fraught with problems. A danger is therefore implicit in refusing to think in terms of change" (1998, 188).

In saying this he suggests that people can be reduced to a problem or we can recognise that, quite to the contrary, they have problematic lives. In one of the following sections I will discuss this further.

METHODS AND THEORY

Choosing qualitative methodologies

It was clear from the outset that using qualitative methods would be the way to go. Qualitative methods are well suited to research that involves personal and sensitive issues, particularly when research objectives depend on a relationship of trust between researcher and subject (Thagaard 2003). The research questions demanded that the boys' point of view be investigated. I assumed that the boy's stories of moving from home to the street could include tales of parental abuse, neglect and rejection, as well as the young person's own disobedience and/or involvement with drugs or crime. Any one of these topics could prove difficult for the boys to talk about and their willingness to discuss such issues would depend on me building a good relationship with them.

Meeting my research subjects

Qualitative methods are often used when studying marginal groups (Thagaard 2003). It may take the researcher a relatively long time to establish contact with such groups and qualitative methods allow him

or her to do so. Before going to Suva I had some concerns about my ability to establish a rapport with the boys. I had read stories of street children in other places who were sick of researchers after having been approached by a few. I also read about street children's general scepticism towards anyone or anything that might have some flavour of officialdom or prying into their business. My fears proved to be unfounded and the boys gave me a more welcome reception than what I had dared to hope for.

A researcher doing field work needs to negotiate a role vis-à-vis the subjects. This involves communicating who the researcher is and is not in relation to the subjects. Graue and Walsh (1998) encourage anyone doing research with children to communicate something to the effect of "I want to learn from you, please let me be here". I followed their advice as best I could when asking the boys if they could help me make this paper possible. A couple of times the boys forgot, or I failed to communicate properly, what my role was. One manifestation of this was when a boy asked me if I had come all the way to Suva to *help* the street kids. I then had to reiterate why I had come to Suva.

Graue and Walsh (1998) describe doing research with children as a disciplined form of hanging out with people who are smarter about their world than you are. They also remind us that gaining access is an ongoing process. In this regard I tried to catch up with at least some of the boys on most week days.

I knew that many of the street kids worked as shoe shiners and to initiate contact I simply had my shoes polished by a few different boys around town. The shoe shine businesses on Suva's street corners

were good starting points for communication because the boys kept still for long periods and had time to chat between customers. Joining the boys as they worked also gave me the opportunity to observe them in a city context, namely to study the interaction between boys, customers and other city dwellers.

On some days I joined the boys for morning tea at a local church open to all who wanted a well priced bite. This church cafe, to my knowledge, was the only place where the boys could sit inside around a table during the daytime and chat with each other without being “disturbed”. These morning teas presented a great opportunity for me to talk with them because they were “off duty” and relaxed. Again, I was interested in the boys’ relationship with others and these tea sessions gave me a chance to study the boys in relation to the volunteers who served them tea.

In the evenings I visited them at the hostel where most of them slept most nights. As is the Fijian way, they were always eager to share their food with me and in return I used to bring some nibblies for them. After this the boys normally went back to town again. Generally speaking it was not considered wise for a woman to be alone in Suva after dark and for this reason I never went with them.

A few weeks after first meeting the boys they invited me to join them for a swim at a mountain spring just outside Suva. To me this indicated a level of acceptance that I was hoping for and I was happy to accompany them.

Observation

Observation means that the researcher is present in the environments where the subjects are and systematically observes how the subjects act (Thagaard 2003). This method is particularly useful when studying the subjects' interactions with others because by doing so the researcher can focus on how individuals relate to one another within a particular social context.

Spending time with the boys on their ground allowed me to gain an insight into their every day lives, their relationships with one another, their customers, the passing crowd and the police. As we got to know each other informal conversations developed that allowed me to glean useful information. The boys were on their own turf and seemed at ease. They offered their opinions and perspectives on numerous issues of common interest without me posing a question beforehand. I definitely feel that spending time with the boys in this manner helped me to better understand them and their circumstances. One obvious and at times frustrating limitation was the language barrier. While English is the official language of Fiji, the boys always spoke Fijian to one another and more often than not to their customers, passers-by and the police. Because of this, the full benefit of the observation method could only be gained with a proper understanding of the Fijian language.

I made sure not to sleep between gathering the information and recording it. I did not take notes whilst with the boys as I felt this

would be a distraction to all of us. Instead I wrote field notes with comments and evaluations each night after seeing them.

Interviews and life stories

Interviews are a suitable method for gathering information about how people understand experiences and events in their lives (Thagaard 2003). I interviewed thirteen boys, and analysed eleven of these interviews. Two interviews were not included because the subjects' statements proved to be too unreliable.

Eight of the interviews were conducted using the semi-structured approach. By this I mean the themes were defined in advance but not the order in which the different themes were discussed. This approach allowed me to follow the respective boy's stories while still ensuring that the information gathered remained relevant to the themes that I had identified as important.

The questionnaire was designed to build on ideas and theoretical perspectives from other academic work. I also attempted to ask questions that were of relevance to the boys. I did not have access to much information about street kids in Fiji and relied on research that had been conducted in other countries to gain some insight into issues that they might consider as important or relevant to their lives. I backed this up by reading as much about Fijian society and history as possible. Routine questions appeared at the start of

each interview and I gradually moved on to potentially more sensitive topics as the interview progressed.

The typical sit down research interview is difficult to conduct with children (Graue and Walsh 1998). Having said this, the boys I interviewed were not little children. They had reached their teens and a couple were even older. Still I chose to keep the interviews short and quite informal in the belief that this would be less daunting for them. I trusted that I could gather additional information by spending time with the boys in more informal settings. In this regard the informal sessions presented a good opportunity for me to ask clarifying questions if in hindsight their stories from the formal sessions didn't quite add up.

The interviews were conducted during down time when the boys were not busy. I chose the hostel where they ate and spent their nights as the most appropriate location. All interviews were held in a private room that the boys did not normally have access to. Because some of the boys were not entirely comfortable expressing themselves in English I used a sociology student, who was also a live-in volunteer at the hostel, as an interpreter.

One point of concern for me is that some time after the interviews were conducted it became clear that there were tensions between some of the volunteers and street boys. Despite this the boys seemed confident around this particular volunteer at the time of the interviews and I felt the atmosphere in the room was good.

After eight interviews using the semi-structured approach it became clear that I was not gaining much in the way of further insights into the research objectives. For the three remaining

interviews I used a life story approach, where I simply asked each boy to tell me his story. I kept the themes from the semi-structured interviews in mind as prompts in case any of the boys got stuck. Two boys who I knew particularly well and had good rapport with told me their stories in this way. The third one asked if he could tell me his story. The life stories method allows subjects to construct a story which places their experiences into a context that gives meaning (Thagaard 2003). I feel this is so with these boys' accounts. Through their stories they communicated ideas about how events in their lives were connected. I believe the material I gathered using this method is richer and has more "warmth".

In light of the above perhaps I should have used the life story approach from the start. On the other hand, I didn't know the boys from the semi-structured interviews as well as the other boys, at least not at the beginning of the field work, and therefore asking these boys about their life stories may not have proven as successful. It may be that the success of the life-story approach resulted from the closer relationship between me and the boys rather than the method I employed to gather the information. My inexperience as an interviewer at the time was another factor and in this respect I feel that the first eight interviews provided me with the necessary structure to ensure that the relevant themes were covered. I did not tape the semi-structured interviews as at the time I had concerns about this being intrusive and making the interviews too formal. Because I had greater confidence in myself and in my relationship to the boys at the time of collecting the life stories I chose to tape the life stories with each boy's consent. This added further depth. I did not see any

disadvantages to taping these particular interviews and in fact the boys' seemed to enjoy listening to their own voices afterwards.

I made notes during all interviews. At night I fleshed out these notes and began the process of coding and interpreting. This work continued on my return from Fiji. I didn't have access to specialised software for analysing qualitative data, so instead made matrices in ordinary spreadsheets. This helped me compare information provided by each boy.

Ethical considerations

The basis for any research project is the subjects' informed consent (Thagaard 2003). The subjects must also be made aware that they can at any time withdraw from the project. With these principles in mind I did my best to spread the word on the street that I had come to Suva in the hope of writing a small book about street kids from Fiji. I said that this was my homework for university and that I hoped they could help me, but made it clear that they didn't have to be involved if they didn't want to be. This was repeated when asking each boy if he wanted to participate in an interview. I also said that even if he wanted to be interviewed he was free not to answer any questions that he felt uncomfortable about. I reiterated that he could change his mind at any time if he wished not to participate further.

When researching street kids special considerations arise with regard to the issue of informed consent. Normally a researcher would be

expected to seek the approval of parents when working with children and young people under 18 years of age. Street kids are, as a group, characterized by varying degrees of estrangement from their parents. In such circumstances parental consent is very difficult if not impossible to obtain.

Confidentiality is another essential principle of ethical research (Thaagard 2003). To this end I attempted at all times to be respectful of the boys' entitlement to privacy and confidentiality. Biographical information is naturally not included in this paper. Additionally I have arranged the boys' accounts in such a way as to lessen the likelihood of any particular boy being recognised. By this I mean that I have tried my best to break up their stories to avoid presenting a complete and recognisable picture of any one individual.

Despite my best efforts to conceal the identity of each individual, I appreciate that the information in this paper can be linked to a small group of very recognisable people. This leads me to a third commonly accepted principle of ethical research, namely that the safety and well being of the subjects should not be compromised (Thagaard 2003). Police violence was a central theme in the boys' stories and can serve as an example. Including the boys' stories of violence perpetrated by police against them potentially exposes the boys as a group to the danger of retribution by the police. I chose to include this aspect of their experiences in the paper because allegations of police violence appear regularly in Fijian newspapers and in this respect it is not uncommon for street people themselves to go to the media with accounts of police violence.

Document analysis

While in Fiji I also spent a great deal of time in the National Archives searching for newspaper articles that could shed light on my research objectives. I was interested to find out how people talk about street kids and how attitudes towards street kids are reflected in these conversations. I interpreted the articles customising Clarke and Cochrane's (1998) simple framework for analysing social issues:

- Are street kids in Fiji talked about as people *having* problems?
- Are street kids talked about as people *being* problems?
- Whose interests are served by the way street kids are defined as a social problem?
- What solutions are proposed following the definition of street kids as having or being problems respectively?

Later in this chapter I will outline the social constructionist perspectives that have informed this framework

The material

I collected 132 newspaper articles from Fiji's three daily newspapers. I browsed through all newspapers published between January 2000 and March 2004, the bulk of the material is from this period. I also collected some articles that were published between June 1996 and December 1999. I found these older articles in folders arranged by themes such as "Poverty" and "Children" in the Fiji Times' archives

and in the library of the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy.

Around a third of the articles focused on street kids in particular, another third on beggars, prostitutes and street people in general. The last third of the articles has a broader focus and embraces topics such as police violence, exploitation of children, parenting, the school system and youth unemployment. These articles have informed this paper but were not suitable for analysing society's perceptions and actions vis-à-vis street people.

I analysed both the stories on street kids and the stories about beggars, prostitutes and street people in general because I found that society's perceptions and actions in relation to all street people are very similar. My focus in this paper is on comments made about street people by representatives of the Fiji Police, the Social Welfare Department and the Lord Mayor as spokesperson for the Suva City Council. The three commented on street people in 31, 16 and 12 articles respectively. I also analysed a Social Welfare Department memo and interviewed six representatives from NGOs and the Social Welfare Department.

My other focus was on statements made about street people by Fiji's alternative voices. They featured in 19 articles and were represented by the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA), the Fijian Council of Social Services (FCOSS) and The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC). Other voices commenting on street people included letters from the editor and church organisations.

Notes of caution

Texts used in document analysis are written for a different purpose than what the researcher uses them for (Thagaard 2003). Therefore an important principle of document analysis is that the text must be evaluated in the context in which it was written.

The newspaper articles for example are not policy documents with carefully formulated strategies on what should be done to address the issue of street kids. Although all statements appear to have been made by senior people, none of the commentators were ever identified or described for example as the “official spokesperson” or “media liaison officer” and therefore some of the statements may represent unauthorised or private viewpoints.

The commentators may also have been misquoted or been victims of poor journalism and sub-editing. In this regard I tried to focus on content rather than language. As mentioned, I browsed through all papers from 2000– 2004. I did not notice any objections or retractions related to the articles I have used in my analysis. I could of course have overlooked some and it is also possible that parties may have felt misquoted or misrepresented in some way without actually seeking to have their complaint or concern printed.

While it may sound a little harsh I feel it necessary to say that the prevailing style of journalism in Fiji does not easily lend itself to analysis. Statements can be contradictory making different interpretations all the more possible.

Keeping all of the above in mind I have tried my best to be fair when presenting the main impressions of my analysis.

The construction of social problems

I will now have a closer look at the ideas that have inspired the framework that I'm borrowing for this analysis. Many of the ideas discussed in the literature review are also influenced by similar perspectives to those that I will now detail.

Clarke and Cochrane (1998) provide an overview of different constructionist perspectives on social problems. Building on writers such as Berger and Luckmann, Gramsci and Foucault they present an introduction to how social problems are identified, defined and acted upon. A starting point is that it is not a given what issues are to be considered social problems. Not all troubles experienced by people are regarded as social problems by wider society. Troubles that fail to grab public attention and instead remain a private concern are not social problems. The issue is instead viewed as a mere fact of life.

Social problems are continuously defined and redefined through an active process, and the perceptions of what issues constitute social problems will change depending on time and place. Clarke and Cochrane (1998) explore how this construction takes place. They aim in other words to explain why some issues are defined as worthy of public attention, anxiety or action while other issues are not. One determining factor can be volume; the concerns of a few are less likely to be regarded as a social problem than if the same concerns

are shared by a large number of people. The seriousness of the concerns can also influence whether the issue is considered to be a social problem or not. Clarke and Cochrane are careful to note however that scale and volume by themselves are insufficient to determine what issues are defined as social problems. The wider social and policy context in which the troubles occur is also important. In this regard a good fit with policy trends and issues that are already on the agenda can determine whether the troubles are defined as a social problem or not. Finally, it matters who is experiencing the troubles, their social standing and significance.

In a nutshell, Clarke and Cochrane (1998) argue that social problems are constructed via two different routes; either the wider society recognises that a group of people is having a problem or they consider the group of people to be the problem. Sometimes a social problem can be identified via both these routes. Homeless people can for example be viewed as victims of an inadequate housing policy. Alternatively, homeless people can be perceived as threats to social order in that they are believed to be engaged in crime, are seen as unpleasant evidence of a failing welfare system or that they simply challenge the norms of society by choosing to live differently.

Once a social problem is defined it is frequently accompanied by a discussion about what should be done (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). Different interpretations of an issue will demand different responses. For instance, if homeless people are viewed as victims of an inadequate housing policy there may well be calls for an increase in public housing. Alternatively, if they are perceived as eyesores there may be calls for the authorities to remove or arrest

them. Policy will be determined by whether an issue is viewed in terms of people having problems or as people being problems. A focus on the construction of social problems may seem abstract; nevertheless the policy formulation that follows such construction has significant consequences for peoples' lives. What all the different strands of social constructionism have in common is an emphasis on the way in which shared understandings or representations of the world shape our actions within it.

Berger and Luckmann's labelling perspective focuses on the process by which some behaviours and types of people become marked out for social disapproval (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). These people are labelled or targeted by the wider society as different and requiring some form of social response.

Gramsci links the definition of social problems to issues of social interests, power and ideologies (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). Groups in dominant positions will try to use ideology, defined as a set of ideas, to legitimise existing arrangements and their own privileged positions. Ideology is used to define what is and what is not a social problem depending on what serves dominant interests. Groups with differing interests use their own ideologies to challenge the dominant groups' definitions and interpretations of a social problem. Both groups may try to present their viewpoints as representing common sense by painting a coherent picture of the world. The group that is the most successful in doing so is, for the time being at least, is able to put their chosen issue on the agenda in the manner that fits their interests.

Social constructionists in the tradition of Foucault find the concept of ideologies to be too narrow and simplified (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). They prefer to talk about discourses rather than ideologies. Discourses provide common grounds for how groups, regardless of their interests, opinions and agenda, talk about social problems. Discourses define what the problem is and because groups with different viewpoints share a definition they can compete and argue, but only within the framework of the definition. Perspectives that don't share the particular definition have difficulty being heard. Discourses are formed via debates about social problems. Political statements, TV reports, academic texts and everyday conversations are all channels for such debates.

Discourses define and limit how groups talk about an issue, for example poverty (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). This particular issue is defined in such a way that the population is divided into the poor and the non-poor. The attention is directed towards the poor because they are the deviations from the norm of being non-poor. The focus is on the possible reasons for why poor people are poor rather than why the non-poor are not. Poor people's attitudes, behaviour and characteristics can then be examined to find explanations for why they are poor.

Discourses shape and become institutionalised in social policies (Clarke and Cochrane 1998). They determine what and how something can be done to address a social problem. Poor people have things done to them because the focus is on them. Discourses are also about power relationships. The discourse on poor people for example

empowers state agencies to monitor, assess or intervene in poor people's lives.

Summary – methods and theory

This paper is based on research using different methods; observation, interviews, life stories and document analysis. The interviews and life stories have in particular been helpful for development of the street kids understanding of their own situations. The life story approach was perhaps more successful than the semi structured interviews. A lack of Fijian language skills prevented me from benefiting fully from observations as a method. Spending time with the street kids was still one of the most valuable things I did and I learned a lot from numerous little conversations with the boys. The document analysis is inspired by Clarke and Cochrane's (1998) framework on how social problems are constructed.

STREET KIDS IN SUVA

The boys and their place

I have previously talked about how confusion can arise when different writers apply the term “street children” in different ways. In the hope of avoiding this I would now like to paint for you a picture of the street kids and the place where they live.

Who are they?

The young boys and men who are described in this paper were aged between their early teens and mid-twenties at the time of my field work. Most of them had been street kids since they were between 11 and 15 years of age. People in Suva continue to call them street kids as they enter their twenties. They are all of Melanesian, Polynesian or mixed European ethnicity. None of them is Indo-Fijian (Fiji Islanders whose Indian ancestors migrated to Fiji in the early 1900s).

Where did they live?

All of the boys that I got to know had limited or no contact with their families. There was one exception to this. One boy was in the process

of moving back home having spent the previous five years away. His move back home was unusual and I shall comment further on this later. Some of the other boys visited family a few times during the year.

For the most part, the boys that I spoke with during my fieldwork did not sleep rough on the streets, in parks or squats. The majority of them spent most nights in the basement of a hostel for young boys who for various reasons could not stay with their families. The hostel management had decided to open up the basement for the street kids because they saw that they had nowhere else to go at night. The street kids had a different position in the hostel than the boys who lived there permanently. The “permanent boys” had their own bed and were served simple meals. The younger boys went to school while some of the older ones had jobs or went to college. A group of volunteers were supposed to provide some degree of care and supervision to the boys.

The street kids slept in a large room in the basement of the hostel. There were some old sofas and mattresses in the room that the boys could grab for the night depending on how fast they were. They did not eat with the permanent boys but normally shared a meal of bread and cereals, which they brought with them from town. There was a shower they could use, and despite it not being their space, the boys sometimes watched television upstairs with the permanent boys.

The street boys’ arrangement with the hostel was informal. The door was kept unlocked and anyone could enter the premises. Despite this it was clear that only the street boys were welcome. During times of heightened prosecution of street people, adults had come to the

hostel. A great deal of tension had accompanied their arrival. The boys could come and go as they pleased. There were few rules to adhere to and the volunteers would only interfere if the boys did something like smoke marijuana inside.

What did they do?

The majority of the boys worked as shoe shiners on street corners around Suva. The shoeshine boys are certainly not the only young people working in Suva's informal sector. Boys and girls younger than them are working at the markets, selling newspapers, or begging alongside their parents. In this sense the shoeshine boys are not special. Nor are they the only shoe shiners in town. Men in their thirties also shine shoes for a living. One of these men told me he had done so since he was a young boy. He had been living with his mother at the time and had not seen himself as a street kid.

Unemployment and the informal economy

The street kids should be viewed in the context of a relatively high unemployment rate. Reserve Bank of Fiji estimates have put the figure at around 7-8% over the last decade, which many feel is a gross underestimation¹. This being the case, opportunities in the formal economy for young and old alike are limited. There is a significant and well developed informal economy.

¹ www.reservebank.gov.fj

Bryant estimated that 30% of young people in Fiji were unemployed in 1991 (Reddy, Naidu and Mohanty 2003). In 2004 Fiji's Ministry of Labour reported that the labour market could only absorb 7000 fresh tertiary graduates and school leavers against the 27,000 students finishing their education each year (Fiji Times 17.02.04). Included in these numbers were young adults with university degrees and students who had completed their secondary education. In this context early school leavers with little or no parental support and poor connections will clearly be fighting an uphill battle to find work in the formal economy.

It has been estimated that Suva's informal employment sector constitutes approximately 51% of the overall employment market. This is a much higher proportion than in large third world cities such as Jakarta, Manila, Colombo and La Paz, but lower than in cities such as Chennai and Lahore (World Resources 1998 -1999 in Reddy et al. 2003). Without defining "child", they suggest that 1 in every 20 workers in the urban informal sector in Suva is a child.

Fiji's social welfare system

To my knowledge none of the boys received any support from the Social Welfare Department. The government provides a very small social welfare payment to people who are able to prove they are destitute (The Government of Fiji/UNICEF 1996). This payment is known as the family assistance allowance. The maximum monthly allowance could be described as barely adequate to meet the recipients' basic needs.

The Juveniles Act states that all needy and underprivileged children under the age of seventeen are the responsibility of the Social Welfare Department (The Government of Fiji/UNICEF 1996). Due to inadequate resourcing there is a chronic shortage of facilities to care for such children, and the few that exist are coming under increasing strain. Very few children are placed in foster care with carers other than their relatives because very few “non-family” carers have made themselves available to the department.

Why are they street kids? Suva street kids in context

The process of moving from home to the street was central to the boys’ stories. In the following chapter I aim to shed light on the reasons why young Fijian boys become street kids. I will look at their choices in the context of their family situation and structural change in Fiji.

Money and freedom

Some of the boys I spoke to explained that they had been attracted to aspects of street life and the “tough guy” street kid identity before making the move. Most boys had known street kids while still living with their families and these friends or acquaintances had inspired

them to run away. "I knew boys who were like that and I wanted to be like them," one boy said.

Glauser (1997) notes that becoming a street child is a process and not something that happens overnight. This rings true in Fiji also. The boys often engaged in behaviour they associated with street life before actually breaking away from their families. One boy described how such behaviour made it difficult for him to continue living at his uncle's place: "My older cousin showed me this life. I started to skip school some days and it went from there. I learned to steal and things like that." The boy explained that his uncle was very religious and would not approve of his ways "I knew he thought I was a bad person so I started sleeping at the market and around town. I put cardboard around me and slept. My cousin ended up in prison, but I made other friends."

Many boys appreciated the freedom that was offered by life on the streets, the freedom associated with a lack of supervision and generally being able to do as they pleased. They said it was good to be able to smoke marijuana and drink alcohol without being "hassled". In some cases the use of marijuana had caused great tension while living with their guardians.

Some were enticed to the streets by stories of easy money. The boys often made FJ \$20, an equivalent of US \$12, a day in 2004 and on some days they could make considerably more. They were able to do so by polishing shoes for money and persuading people to give them money. This level of income is more than many adults could expect to earn, let alone their peers. When asked what they most liked about street life the most common answer was money. Davis (1986) notes

that “young Fijians today in urban centres have learnt to aspire after material goods that others have, including their leaders.” With regard to leaving the family, it is clear that money is a strong pull factor.

Choices and economic realities

Appreciating money and freedom is one thing but following through once a decision to leave has been made is quite another step to take and represents a profound change in the direction of the young person’s life. The why, where, when and how questions that are a part of each individual’s decision to leave home will of course vary and can be affected by factors such as personality and relationships. By relationships I mean those that the individual is leaving as well as those that the individual is expecting ahead. The boys make their choice in context.

Their appreciation of money does not necessarily mean that they chose the streets because it was a lucrative or easy option. More often than not they started working and living on the streets because that was the only option they saw. Many boys told me that they went to the streets “to look for my life” – their way of saying – to look after myself. One boy explained how he ran away from home in the midst of his parents’ separation: “My parents separated when I was eleven. That’s when I ran away. I roamed around in town because this was how I could look for my life”. Others had lived with their grandparents and had nowhere to go when they died. One boy said “I lived with my grandmother. She helped me and paid my school fees. Then she died. I quit school and started to live on the streets.” Yet

another boy told a similar story: “I lived with my grandfather because my mother was married in America and my father had died in the accident. When my grandfather died I started to look for my life in Suva doing shoeshine and grab-and-run.” Given Fiji’s high unemployment rate, the limitations of the social security system and the important role of the informal sector within the economy, it is understandable that the boys should see street life as a solution to their predicament.

Blaming the parents?

Just like Beazley (1998) found in Yogyakarta, comments in the Fijian media tend to link street kids with poor parenting. There is certainly reason to ask where the parents are in the boys’ stories of becoming street kids. Why didn’t they provide the support and guidance necessary for their children to choose a safer path? From an outsider’s point of view, the street kids could be excused for resenting their parents. Despite this, I rarely heard the boys express resentment towards them. One boy said that he didn’t care about his father because he was a gangster in prison, however I didn’t interpret this to mean that he blamed his father or anyone else for becoming a street kid. Another boy, who turned to the streets after his parents separated, did see his predicament as an outcome of their separation and claimed that they did nothing to get him back when he ran away to the streets. Again, despite this he said “I had this weakness in my

heart” which stopped him from being angry at them. It seems that his emotional ties to his parents prevented him from resenting them even if he felt that they had let him down.

While the boys in general did not blame their parents they did not express any feelings of guilt for running away either. This is different from Hecht’s (1998) findings in Brazil. Recalling a previous chapter, Hecht argues that Brazil’s street children did feel guilty for letting down their mother or foster mother and for failing to fulfil their obligations to contribute to the household. I spoke with only one boy who expressed regret of the kind Hecht describes. This particular boy was one of the few who had actually lived with his parents rather than with relatives immediately prior to leaving for the streets. His mother had also repeatedly reached out to him on the streets attempting to convince him to return home. He seemed to appreciate having parents who involved themselves, and later in this paper I will discuss what this may have meant for him. He appeared remorseful for acting disrespectfully towards his parents when he said things such as: “I followed my friends, stopped going to school and stopped going home. I slept in town and mucked around. I drank, smoked marijuana and talked back to my father and mother.” He particularly talked about one incident that seems to have strengthened his appreciation of his parents: “Last year I went to the boys centre because I was too small for prison. I was there for two months. I saw the small kids there with no mother, no father”. It was clear from the way he talked about these children that he felt sorry for them for not having parents like he did.

A few boys said that their mother had emigrated. This suggests that their mothers are quite resourceful because emigrating from Fiji is far from a straight forward matter. Looking at this at face value, leaving your children behind seems careless to say the least, but again judgements should only be made based on a deeper knowledge of each family's circumstances. Many Fijians dream about emigrating and it is therefore entirely possible that these parents did move overseas. Having said this, I feel less sure of the boys' stories on the subject of their mothers' whereabouts than on any other topic. It did strike me at an intuitive level that some of the boys could have found it less painful to say that their mother was in a far away place, and therefore unable to keep in touch, rather than in a neighbouring village.

A community leader who knew the boys well expressed the opinion that street kids were being used by their parents. She claimed that the only time these kids see their parents is when the kids have money. I did not talk with the boys' parents and families and therefore I cannot be certain of anything with respect to their side of the story and the context in which they acted and made their choices.

One boy who had taken part in some street robberies said: "When I have a lot of money I visit my mother and bring her food and gifts. She knows where the money comes from and asks me to look after myself." The same boy also claimed that his mother had been happy when he was kicked out of school because she could not afford to pay his school fees. It is impossible for an outsider to determine the

level of neglect shown by this mother or how difficult her circumstances are without closer interaction with everyone involved.

Davis reminds us that:

“the blame for young peoples’ troubles cannot simply be thrown onto their parents, who themselves are often under the very considerable stress of financial and social pressures as a result of unemployment, overcrowding, low wages and so on” (1986:158).

Parents’ divorce

Many of the boys began their stories by telling me that their parents had divorced or separated. They went on to talk about moving to the streets, in most cases after having first lived with their relatives following their parent’s separation. Two boys had moved directly to the streets after their parents had separated. The transition for the others occurred when things did not work out at their relatives’ place. All of the boys who came from broken families made a connection between these two major events in their lives, namely the parents’ separation and the boy himself moving to the streets.

A family break up in most cases will be a financial and emotional burden for everyone involved. The process can be more difficult in Fiji compared to wealthier countries with better developed welfare systems, particularly if there is insufficient support from extended family. Without such support the financial consequences of

the break up can be devastating with women and children often being the worst hit.

Following a divorce the Fijian courts distribute property according to the parties' economic contribution to the household, often ignoring the woman's unpaid work as homemaker (The Government of Fiji/UNICEF 1996). Women can therefore end up with very little in economic terms even if in most cases they have custody of the child. Under Fijian law the non-custodial parent is required to pay child maintenance. The parent's capacity to pay is taken into consideration when determining the maintenance payable. The 1996 Government/UNICEF report noted at the time that maintenance payments often involved small amounts such as FJ \$5.00 – \$7.50 per week per child. Only 19% of the maintenance orders were paid regularly, while 35% were paid sporadically. More than half of all maintenance orders were never paid at all. The report also made it clear that the result of parents' refusal or inability to pay maintenance, together with a lack of social support, is that many children are deprived of educational opportunities and an acceptable standard of living. A social worker interviewed in the local newspaper saw it this way: "Single mothers have no option but to go out and look for work." (Sunday Times 30.11.03). She goes on to say that wages in female dominated jobs such as in the garment industry are so low that a woman in such circumstances may consider it impossible to look after her children and instead entrust them to relatives.

Adinkrah (1995) links an increase in youth delinquency in Fiji with single mothers' difficulties in meeting the basic needs of their children, as well as their inability to keep them in school. Media

reports also link divorce with street kids and youth crime. In an upcoming section I will look at some legal changes that were designed to alleviate some of the difficulties mentioned above.

Children living with relatives

Prior to leaving for the streets the majority of the street boys had actually lived with their aunts, uncles or grandparents and not their parents. There is nothing unusual about the boys' experience of living with relatives. Davis (1986) characterises individuals joining the household of a relative in a different community as an elementary part of Fijian culture. The practice solidifies a young Fijian's position as part of the community as well as their relationship to kin. The street boys had been sent to their relatives when their parents had separated, passed away or emigrated. One had moved from the islands to stay with his uncle while attending school in town. The street boys' placements had not been arranged to celebrate or consolidate their position as part of the extended family, but rather they had been sent there for very practical reasons; someone had to look after them when their parents either could not or would not.

Davis (1986) also notes from his work in Fiji that feeling unwanted or unfairly treated by guardians can push kids out of the household and into a new kind of identity on the streets. Many boys told me that they took to the streets for precisely such reasons. They wanted to escape the poor treatment they were being subjected to by

the relatives they were living with: "My uncle used to hit me and pull a sack over my head. I left when I was eleven and it felt good to go. I liked to be free from my uncle." Another boy was upset with his uncle's treatment of the whole family: "I didn't like it at my uncle's place. I didn't like the way he treated his wife and children. I found friends and some were shoeshine boys. I ran away from uncle and slept outdoors. It was good to show him that I could make it on my own and be independent." One boy simply said: "My aunt was married and had three kids of her own. She didn't like me much." The boys' stories support Archary's conclusions that a lot of kids who live with relatives or step-parents are expected to work much harder than the biological kids, get inferior food and are scolded more frequently (Davis 1986). The boys did not show the same level of tolerance towards their relatives' behaviour as they did of their parents' behaviour, but again there was little trace of self pity.

The extended family and social change

A Fijian community leader told me that such lack of concern for foster children is unacceptable according to the traditional Fijian way. In one case that we discussed, he told of an uncle who sent his own children to school while sending his nephew off to the markets to sell juice. Referring to the collective orientation in Fijian culture the community leader said that you are to treat relatives' children just like your own.

Young Fijians are also becoming less accepting of their elder's authority. Some may be reluctant to accept being bossed around by adults, particularly if the elder is not a parent. The same community leader also talked about a former street youth who was reunited with his uncle in the village only to return to Suva because he didn't like to take orders from the uncle. The community leader told the boy that he should have followed the Fijian way and listened to his uncle. "People these days want to be independent but I think it is foolish to break away from the old so completely," the community leader said.

Many writers note that rapid social change puts pressure on young people, families and communities in Fiji (Davis 1986, The Government of Fiji/UNICEF 1996, Plange 2000). Fiji is in a sense caught in a halfway space between tribalism and capitalism, and many people experience conflicting demands from tradition and modernity. Young Fijians face particular challenges. Young people have to carve out their identities and roles as adults at a time when their country is undergoing rapid change. The young are experiencing higher levels of education and media exposure than previous generations. The volume of information from a now global media, school and family often contains contradictory messages, which can lead to greater confusion. Plange characterises the search for identity undertaken by many young Fijians in the midst of an evolving Fijian nation-state as a double coming of age.

It is traditional for Fijian children to stay with their relatives but the context in which it happens has changed (Davis 1986). Given the economic realities of contemporary Fiji, aunts, uncles or grandparents who assume the responsibility for non-biological

children face familiar as well new challenges. Life in town is becoming increasingly expensive and taking on additional family members can be difficult, especially for those at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. In addition to this the spread of formal education has changed the role of many children. They have gone from being workers to students. Because of this kids in Fiji may now be regarded as an expense where previously they were regarded as a source of labour.

The street youth phenomenon may be seen as a manifestation of the tension between obligation to kin and the demands of a modern economy. Adinkrah (1995) observes that living together in small urban homes can be difficult for both parties and can create a great deal of tension. The young person can escape these pressures by seeking the company of his peers on the streets. Some start living on the streets devoid of family ties. Obligations toward the extended family live on while the economic realities are changing. Taking care of and housing your extended family is still an immensely important part of Fijian culture. However some who feel obliged to take on this responsibility fail to provide the necessary care.

Public concerns about children living with relatives

While some find it hard to look after nephews and nieces for economic reasons, others are simply too old to provide primary care for a child. Public concerns about the practice of leaving children in the care of relatives is expressed in a newspaper item headlined

“Social workers worry about dumped kids” (The Sunday Times 30.11.03). The article focuses on the increasing number of children being left with grandparents to be looked after without the grandparents receiving any kind of support or financial assistance from the child’s parents. One argument in the article is that a lot of the grandparents suffer from illness or the effects of old age and in fact many are in need of care themselves. A Suva magistrate quoted in the article also described some parents’ practise of leaving children in the care of relatives without supporting them financially, as neglectful.

Some view the traditional Fijian focus on community and kin as a weakness. My observation is that many middle class Fiji Islanders with westernised lifestyles seem to relate the street kid phenomenon with the traditional Fijian focus on the community as opposed to the nuclear family and hence their children. They claim that kava drinking, church and fund raising activities distract parents from what should be their primary concern – their children. A legislative committee investigating youth crime drew similar conclusions in a 1961 report comparing Fijian and Indo-Fijian family structures (Adinkrah 1995). The report found that strong bonds and strict parental control within the Indo-Fijian nuclear family provided a foundation of stability, guidance and borders that helped the young person successfully face the world. By contrast, Fijian children didn’t necessarily have stronger bonds to their parents than to other relatives. While the mother definitely was most central for the toddler, other relatives would gradually take over the socialisation process. Children were also encouraged to seek the company of their peers, and in so doing their parents’ influence was further reduced during

their difficult adolescent years. Adinkrah notes an ethnocentric tone in the report but agrees that some Fijian parents give their children excessive freedom, at times to the point of children not receiving sufficient parental attention.

Another Fijian community leader commenting on the fact that the majority of Suva's beggars, street kids and prostitutes are Fijian, provides a different perspective (Fiji Times 11.02.03). In his view the problem is not Fijian tradition but what westernisation has done to tradition. He says that Fijians need to re-appraise their social network "right up to their doorsteps and into their homes" and ask themselves how they are functioning as a family. He urges families to be clear about their role and husbands to remember why they got married. Referencing the bible, as Fijians often do, he says that family fathers and traditional community leaders need to be "shepherds" and look after their "lost sheep". He goes on to say that street people's relatives should show the sort of responsibility that a family did a few months earlier when taking in a boy who had lost his loved ones in a cyclone. This observer is placing a shared responsibility on parents and the extended family. He does not see Fijians' focus on the extended family as a weakness in any way but rather as a security net that should leave no one on the streets. He urges families to go back to the foundational Fijian principles and practices of care, unity, love and meeting with relatives.

Family or government responsible?

Others are asking the Government rather than families and communities to take responsibility. Such viewpoints are expressed in a Fiji Times article about school students from remote areas who are sent to stay with relatives who live closer to the school (25.01.04). A representative of the Fiji Teachers Union said that “while the relatives and friends cannot say no because of relation to or social obligation, they are quite frustrated and cannot give these children the security and well-being they deserve.” Instead of calling on the relatives to care, he concludes that the government should take responsibility. “There is an urgent need for the Government to assist selected schools around the country to develop quality boarding facilities and subsidize accommodation.” This call for boarding schools represents recognition that society is changing and that government does have a role to play.

Legal change

In December 2005 an Act to amend the Family Law Act came into effect in Fiji. I am interested in this Act as it might provide an improved legal framework for children and young people in similar situations to what the boys were in prior to moving to the streets. Among other things the new Act acknowledges the economic difficulties faced by many single mothers and relatives taking on the

responsibility of children following a breakdown in family circumstances.

The Act seeks to make parents more accountable for their child's welfare. It states that children are the primary responsibility of parents and that this duty has priority over other commitments such as maintaining aunts, uncles and cousins. The fact that the legislators saw it necessary to emphasize this point confirms the importance attached to extended family in Fijian society. It also indicates that the authorities recognise that parents should be paying more attention to looking after the needs of their child.

The Act acknowledges that many Fiji Islanders operate within the subsistence economy. Non-custodial parents can therefore be asked to provide in-kind support such as fish and vegetables to the child. A UNDP representative describes this approach as "an innovative and socially just way of looking after children that is fair on everyone involved" (Fiji Times 10.02.04).

It is clear that one of the desired outcomes is to see an increase in the number of child maintenance orders being honoured. If successful in this regard the revised Act should help to lighten the load on the custodial parent following a separation or divorce. Furthermore it seeks to reinforce the duty of fathers to pay maintenance for children born out of wedlock as well as the right of fathers to receive child support from non-custodial mothers.

The Act also requires step-parents to maintain children if the court finds it proper for them to do so. This does not mean that the step-parent takes over the responsibilities of the natural parents, but rather that the step-parent can be expected to contribute. While it is

clear that the Act cannot prevent conflicts from arising between step-parents and children, it helps to reaffirm the great responsibility the step parent takes on when marrying someone who already has a child or children.

Another aim of the Act is to help alleviate the economic difficulties that many experience when caring for other people's children. It confirms a guardian's (which includes grand parents and other relatives) right to receive maintenance for a child they are fostering. While again it is true that the Act cannot prevent a violent uncle from beating up his nephew, these provisions together with a good public education campaign about the Act will hopefully serve to clarify the responsibilities of all parties and thereby lessen tensions that arise out of financial hardship in some households.

From all of the above points it is clear that the Act has the potential to further assist in providing for the welfare of children living with single parents or in the care of relatives. However, a word of caution is offered by one magistrate in an article discussing the Act. She makes it clear that the authorities are under no illusion that legislation in itself will improve the behaviour of those responsible for the welfare of children: "My concern is that when the case comes to us in court it gets a little too late to provide assistance because the court is at the end of the spectrum" (Sunday Times 30.11.03).

Summary – why are they street kids?

Individual motivation, family factors and structural circumstances are closely interlinked when discussing the reasons why the boys turned to the streets. While many of them recognized that they were attracted to aspects of street life they had also faced some very challenging circumstances before leaving home and in most cases saw no other option. A theme in the next section is the tough times they face once on the streets.

Fijian street kids as a social problem

In this section I will look at how Fiji's Social Welfare Department, Police and the Suva City Council define street kids as a social problem and what actions they propose to address the problem. I will also make reference to the authorities' comments on beggars and prostitutes. Often the three groups of street people are referred to in the same newspaper articles and are the objects of the same government strategies. I will attempt to show that the respective roles and responsibilities of each agency influence how they define street kids as a social problem and their suggested actions to address the issue. ECREA, FWCC and FCOSS represent alternative voices in the discussion and as we will see, frequently comment on the authorities' dealings with street people. I will start this section by outlining the

boys' own accounts of how certain actions by the authorities influence their lives.

Tensions with Police

When I asked the boys what they liked least about street life they all replied "the cops". Every single boy I talked to described the Police as their greatest worry. They accused the Police of being violent, unfair and of stealing their money. On a couple of occasions the boys showed me bruising on their bodies, which they claimed was caused by the Police. They said the Police sometimes took them to remote spots in and around town where no one could see and then beat them up.

The boys felt aggrieved by these beatings. Their sense of injustice struck me because it was in such contrast to the almost philosophical attitude they displayed when discussing the rough handling they had previously experienced in the home environment. Perhaps this was a function of time? All the boys I spoke with had moved to the streets months if not years ago while the alleged Police violence was recent and ongoing. The boys felt that the Police' response was disproportionate. The punishment did not fit the crime. Their sense of disproportion was emphasized by the difference in size between themselves and the Police. They often described themselves as "small boys" in contrast to policemen and adult "gangsters" who were "big boys".

The boys also felt unfairly targeted by the Police and claimed they were taken in for questioning in response to any report of petty

crime in Suva. "Whenever something happens in Suva the Police come to question us and punch us," was how one of them put it. It was clear that they connected the Police' scapegoating of them with their high visibility in the streetscape: "We always get the blame from the Police because we are the ones who are here everyday", one boy said. Another said: "They don't like us street kids. They are trying to get rid of us but our numbers just keep on increasing."

Some boys believe the Police target them at times for no other reason than to steal their money. One boy said: "You know, they only get paid every fortnight. That's why they come - to take our money". Another said: "The cops tell us to put our money on the ground. That way they can take it without anyone noticing. "

The boys said that the Police regularly destroyed their wooden shoeshine boxes. They use these boxes to carry shoe polish and brushes and they also serve as a footrest for the customers. On one occasion I saw the remains of such a box on the street and the boys claimed this was the Police's doing. If so, smashing the boxes no doubt makes working on the street more unpleasant for the boys; however, destroying the tools of their trade will not stop the trade nor put them off street life. Ironically one boy indicated that the Police actions, rather than turning them into law abiding citizens, could in fact have quite the opposite effect: "They don't want us to shine shoes. They want us to go and rob people. When we sit here and shine they come and hassle us. They want us to go and rob people so they can catch us and show off!"

The boys also express a sense of injustice and seem to recognise that there is a lack of due process. When I asked if the Police weren't just doing their job one boy replied: "They are not just doing their job.

What they do is wrong. The Police should act normal. They should ask questions, but the police in Fiji, they torture.” Another boy said: “Fijian law is a dangerous law, it’s not like overseas. If you say no, the Police in Fiji will punch you until you say yes.” One boy humorously put Police behaviour down to their rural origins: “the cops don’t know the law because they come from the village”.

Incidences of corruption and violence within the Police force are discussed periodically in the media and are often mentioned alongside comments about scarce resources and poor pay and working conditions (The Fiji Times 09.02.04, 13.02.04, 18.02.04, 10.03.04). Of course these reports of misconduct do not prove that the boys’ allegations are true but it does provide some affirmation of their stories.

An interim Minister who was briefly responsible for the Social Welfare Department, publicly acknowledged and condemned Police violence towards street kids in a newspaper interview titled “Street kids find hope” (Fiji Times 14.05.01). When asked by the journalist whether rough treatment of the street kids by the Police was justified because the kids were rude and lacked respect, the Minister replied: “Where do you get the idea that the Police have the right to treat the kids badly if they swear and lack respect in public? You encourage them to replicate what is being done to them by adults and the Police over and over.” To my knowledge, this is the only time such a public statement was made.

The licensing system

There was a great deal of tension between the boys and the Police with regard to how policing of the licenses is carried out. All street level traders must purchase a license from the Suva City Council to carry on business. This includes shoe polishers. The license regulates where and when shoe polishers can work. They are not permitted to work outside the stipulated times and place. The Police make regular and random checks to confirm that the boys carry their license and abide by it's terms.

While the licensing system is not in place solely for the shoe polishers, it does provide the authorities with some information and control over a group of people who in general are characterised by their "placelessness". This view, that the license was a tool of control, was shared by some of the boys. One boy explained: "They always wanted us to go home, that's why they came up with those licenses". Others believed that the Police were using the license issue as a pretext to harass them: "The Police sometimes come and hassle us. They ask for the license and keep coming even when they know our licenses are okay."

The boys also knew how to use the licensing requirement to their benefit as a method of generating income. They sometimes told tourists and locals that they didn't have a license and asked for \$20 to purchase one when in reality a license only costs a few dollars.

Despite the potential for trouble, the boys occasionally polished shoes outside of their allocated locations. They did this for example if they met a regular customer when they were moving around town

and didn't want to miss an opportunity to do business. At other times they just wanted to hang out with their shoeshine mates on a different street corner to where they were permitted but couldn't afford to take the day off. When I queried them about working outside the area they were licensed to work they laughed at me for being scared saying: "You are scared of the cops! Why are you so scared of the cops?" On one occasion one boy mocked another for being afraid of the Police. He held his fist up against the other boy's face as if to punch him and shouted "we are not afraid of the cops!" The idea was not to succumb to fear.

Street kids as a law and order problem

It is quite clear from the Police's alleged actions towards them that the street kids constitute a problem. A problem that they believe requires "tough love" to solve. The potential for tension between Police and street kids is obvious. The Police' role is to maintain law and order while many street kids admit to flouting the law. Vagrancy laws make it clear that being a street person, in some circumstances can be considered an offence in itself. The street kids work and sometimes sleep on the streets, are young and keep in groups. As such they are more visible than others involved in similar petty crime. This may result in street kids being targeted more than others during day to day policing operations.

It comes as no surprise that some of the articles in which Police comment on street people have a law and order focus. In one article a

Police representative links an increase in the number of beggars, prostitutes and street kids to an increase in crime (Fiji Times 16.02.03). He says that street kids are involved in crime such as gambling and drug pushing. Interestingly he also mentions complaints about prostitutes pick-pocketing their customers as a problem.

Organisations such as ECREA and FWCC are not impressed by this focus on street people and crime. These alternative voices criticise what they see as a disproportionate focus on street people and petty crime compared with white collar criminals or political corruption: "There is so much effort put into prosecuting the vulnerable, yet people including political figures who are alleged to be involved in the political unrest (coup) of 2000, are walking around freely" (Fiji Times 13.02.03).

Police pragmatism

Despite being required to maintain law and order, the Police often display scepticism about what can or cannot be achieved through policing. One such concern relates to the limitations in the vagrancy laws which allow the Police to do nothing more than take street people in for questioning and release them a few hours later (Daily Post 06.01.02). It is perhaps more surprising that Police representatives also warn that chasing street people away does nothing to address the root causes of homelessness and poverty in Fiji (Daily Post 06.01.02, Fiji Times 06.06.01, 01.01.04,). Police officers were also quoted in newspaper articles attributing the presence of street kids to a break down in family values and poor parenting (Fiji Times

08.10.97, 17.12.97, 05.06.01). Such statements by the Police indicate a realisation that they cannot solve the problem of street people and that something must be done at a community and family level.

There would appear to be a certain mismatch between the allegations of Police brutality in the boys' accounts and the Police' comments on the limitations of policing. Many of the clean up campaigns and actions directed towards street people that I discuss in this chapter were initiated by other government authorities. Even when acknowledging their own limitations, the police understand that they have a role to play in executing these strategies. With regard to the violence experienced by the boys, the agenda of Police management may not fit with that of officers facing the hard realities of street policing. As such every episode involving Police officers pursuing street kids need not have been initiated at a higher level. A policeman beating up a street kid or smashing his shoe shine box may be nothing more than the policeman's interpretation of an order to clear the streets. Alternatively, the officer may be venting his frustration about an ongoing conflict with the street kids or he could simply be venting his frustrations over a completely unrelated matter, with the street kid being an easy target.

The Holland Street incident

The 2001 closure of a tunnel in Suva's Holland Street represents one such attempt to solve a problem by policing and moving people out of the way. A group of homeless people residing in the tunnel were

literally smoked out and the tunnel sealed after a young homeless man was accused of killing an elderly woman in the adjoining neighbourhood (Fiji Times 06.06.01). It was alleged by some that the killer had lived in the tunnel and although there was a great deal of uncertainty about this it did not stop the authorities from evicting everyone who lived in the tunnel and sealing it.

Four months before the killing Suva's Lord Mayor was quoted as saying that he would look into the problem of people using the tunnel as a shelter (Daily Post 22.01.01). His statements were made in relation to a series of robberies that had taken place in the area. Immediately after the killing he repeated that the people living in the tunnel had to be removed. The interim Minister for Social Welfare found it appropriate to note that the accused was innocent until proven guilty. The Police made objections saying that sealing the tunnel would not solve the problem but still carried out the order to evict those living in it. Events progressed as the Lord Mayor wanted; the residents were evicted and the tunnel sealed before it had been established whether the accused had actually lived in the tunnel and if he was in fact guilty of the crime. The timing of it all makes it tempting to speculate whether the killing was used as an excuse to implement a decision that had been taken months previously.

Social Welfare Department, responsibility and the “genuine” debate

There were two major Social Welfare Department initiatives related to street people presented in the media reports in the period covered by

my clippings. Below I will outline how the department portrays street people in the media when discussing the initiatives, and how these portrayals may serve to legitimise or explain the strategies they propose. First to a discussion about who is responsible for dealing with street people.

Social Welfare Department saying “not our responsibility”

In an article titled “Who is responsible for them?” a Social Welfare Department representative responds to a letter to the editor which asked the Social Welfare Department to do something about beggars. In the article the representative is quoted as saying that *clearing* beggars off Suva’s streets is not the Social Welfare Department’s responsibility since they are not in charge of *policing* (Fiji Times 03.12.97). The responsibility for action is shifted from the welfare agency to the Police. Making such a statement may serve as a public defence to the previously mentioned letter to the editor, in effect saying “it is not our responsibility, don’t blame us.” At another level this would appear to serve the interests of the Social Welfare Department because by transferring responsibility to other parties the administrative costs are also shifted. In addition, by associating beggars with policing there is an inference that street people represent some kind of law and order problem. Hence the beggars are deemed to be a problem rather than being recognized as having a problem.

The representative goes on to say that most beggars are already on an allowance and that children who resort to begging are taken care of by the state through the department. This makes it clear that in the department’s view the government has done its share. Further to

this she says that the only way to discourage beggars is to stop giving them money and instead donate to charities. One interpretation of this statement is that people beg because naive donors make it attractive to do so and not because their circumstances require them to. The root causes of why beggars beg are implicitly ignored or denied. The statement can also be interpreted as an attempt to transfer the responsibility for assisting beggars from government to non-governmental organisations.

FCOSS, an umbrella body for these organisations, does not accept the department's argument (Fiji Times 03.12.97). In a response to the above statements a representative of FCOSS is quoted to have said "the clearing of beggars from the city streets is the responsibility of the Social Welfare Department."

Social Welfare Department's lack of consistency

As has been noted previously, every so often initiatives are launched to tackle the problem of beggars, street kids and prostitutes. In 1999 a senior officer from the Social Welfare Department announced that a working group, the Rehabilitation Co-ordination Committee, had major plans to get the homeless and street kids off the streets either by encouraging them to return home, institutionalising them or placing them into vocational training (Fiji Times 01.12.99, 06.12.99). If these options failed the committee was to help the street people set up little businesses. At first the officer was quoted as saying that shoe shining could be one such business. However, later in the article she states that it is a great worry for the department that the shoeshine boys have "quite an income". She asks "are we going to allow these children on the streets to dwell on the sympathy of the good heart of

the public to earn money“. She goes on to say that “when we give them money freely they will continue to come to the streets and ask for money. Then more people will come because they know they can get money from the public without a sweat.” Finally she says “there are some who don’t like to work and enjoy asking for money.”

The question begs; should shoe shining be encouraged by assisting kids to set up such businesses or stopped by not purchasing their services? In the context of Fiji’s high unemployment rate and extensive informal economy it is also telling that the department’s representative seems to disregard the fact that the shoeshine boys are being productive insofar as they actually render a service in exchange for the money that the public gives them.

The senior officer also contradicts herself when talking about street kids’ backgrounds. At first she acknowledges that street kids come from violent and broken homes, yet goes on to ask why they become street kids when they come from stable homes. Such contradictory comments serve to illustrate the often incongruous nature of public statements made by this department regarding the causes and solutions to the “street people problem.”

The above comments are also consistent with the public statements about beggars that I referred to previously which were made by a different Social Welfare Department representative two years earlier. Collectively these statements suggest that kids become street kids because a naive public makes it attractive for them to do so and not because their circumstances require them to.

Social Welfare Department's lack of realism

As discussed above, the Social Welfare Department's response to the issue has been marked by a failure to recognise that street people have a serious problem and that the government has a duty of care to assist in finding a solution. I believe that the department's statements also display a lack of realism and consistency with regard to *how* the problem can be "fixed".

In early 2002 a multi-task force was established by the government of the day. This was known internally as Operation Lesu I Vale, which can be loosely translated to mean "Bring Them Back Home." While this initiative did include efforts to return street people to their families, other strategies were also employed to rid the streets of beggars, street kids and prostitutes. These other strategies required the involvement of the Police whose task it was to arrest vagrants who remained on the streets (Daily Post 26.12.01, Minister's internal memo 04.01.02).

An internal Social Welfare Department memo detailing the operation presents some of the street people as being well off with good homes, a steady income from other sources and playing on people's sympathies. Again, it is stated that the majority of street people choose the street because it is an attractive option. In the newspaper article the Minister of Social Welfare states that only three out of twenty five beggars in Suva are genuine (Daily Post 26.12.01), while the memo states that there are 30 disingenuous beggars in Suva. She is further quoted saying that prostitutes can be divided into two groups, "those who trade their bodies for money out of desperation and those who have done it for years and enjoy doing so."

The mistrust is accompanied by a rather striking lack of realism. It is stated in the memo that Suva's genuine beggars could continue to beg for another two weeks. Before the end of this period the Social Welfare Department was to have assisted the beggars by providing them with purpose built homes, up-skilling and in general making them independent and self reliant. How this was to happen is not made clear in the document. It went on to say that should they continue to beg after these two weeks they could be charged under the Vagrancy Act, despite having been identified as "genuine". Once the problem of begging had been eradicated, phases two and three focusing on prostitutes and street youth would be implemented.

In a follow-up article about the operation the Lord Mayor acknowledges that the council is working together with the other authorities and agrees that "we are looking at two weeks time to clear all those who are not supposed to be on the street begging for money and food" (Fiji Sun 03.01.02). The Police on the other hand deny that formal talks have taken place. Further to this the Police representative is reported to have acknowledged that begging is a social issue and that society has a role in assisting those in need and therefore forcing them off the streets will not solve the problem.

A representative from the the FWCC was forthright in her criticism of the Lesu I Vale Operation stating: "This is disgusting. Who do they think they are, behaving like the Taliban, getting rid of beggars and prostitutes? Who else are they getting rid of next?" She goes on to say that the Fijian Government should be looking at root causes such as the poverty cycle and lack of opportunity that stem from macroeconomic issues in the country. This commentator sees the problem of street people in structural terms and not as a life style

choice. For her, street people are people *having* problems rather than *being* problems.

Street people as not “genuine”

In all the above examples the Social Welfare Department questions the genuineness of street people. What it actually means to be a genuine street person is never clearly defined, but I understand from their statements that a genuine street person has no other option than to turn to the streets as a beggar, street kid or prostitute. Disingenuous street people on the other hand do have a choice and can therefore blame no one but themselves for their lot. Comments about street people being disingenuous suggest that living and working on the street is the easy way out and can leave one with the impression that street people could easily have opted for another livelihood.

When focusing on street people as non-genuine the department implies that they are not deserving of further government assistance thereby absolving itself of further responsibility. Instead their representatives tend to link begging, prostitution and the existence of street kids with some character flaw in the people concerned. The street kids can be said to represent a highly visible challenge to any government's claim to be a capable fixer of social problems. Their presence may reflect an unfortunate reality, namely a near stagnant economy resulting in very few employment opportunities for young people, inadequate government support to assist in maintaining the family unit and no government agency to assist a young person if the family fails. The street youth are working and sometimes sleeping in public space and therefore represent a greater challenge to the

government than the rural poor or the squatters in the illegal settlements on the outskirts of Suva who are less visible.

The portrayal of street people as disingenuous is important because it legitimises one set of actions while discouraging a different kind of response. Constructing street people as non-genuine therefore has direct consequences for their every day lives. Viewing street people as problems rather than people with problems hinders the community's ability to recognise and address root cause issues and therefore also has consequences for Fiji's future.

Any criticism of the relevant authorities must of course be tempered by an acknowledgement that prevention and alleviation of the problems associated with street people is not an easy task. It is clear that Fiji has limited resources to tackle the structural issues that affect everyone, not least the most vulnerable in its population. It is also clear that family as well as religious and secular charities remain essential parts of the social security system. At times the Social Welfare Department also recognises that street people face challenges, although these comments seem rather incidental when compared with the frequency of comments about non-genuine street people.

The three examples discussed above represent comments made under three different governments. A more responsible and compassionate attitude towards street people appears to have emerged briefly during the term of the interim government appointed after the coup in 2000. From what I can gather, the ministers in this government were appointed based on their experience and skill as opposed to the more overtly political appointments of past governments, and for that matter, future governments. This administration proposed a different set of actions towards street kids

(Fiji Times 14.05.01). The activities and work programs that they initiated for street kids during their short time in office reflected this.

Organisations such as ECREA don't let the department's claims in relation to street people being disingenuous go unchallenged: "So many people who are well off write off beggars, squatters and the poor as undeserving because they don't want to face the hard reality of growing poverty and inequality in Fiji" (Fiji Times 14.05.01)

Views from the Suva City Council - an aesthetic perspective

In contrast to representatives from the Social Welfare Department, the Lord Mayors speaking on behalf of the Suva City Council never comment on whether street people are genuine or not. Instead their main concern seems to be aesthetic in nature. The Council's charter is such that they can legitimately claim not to be responsible for the welfare of Suva's citizens in the sense that the Social Welfare Department is. If we accept this then it may also be reasonable to suggest that the Council did not feel the same need to free itself of the responsibility for their welfare.

Wardhaugh (2000) finds that street people in Great Britain are sometimes discussed in the media as well as in everyday conversations in terms that evoke a sense of dirt and pollution. The same case could be made in Fiji. They have been variously described as *eyesores* and *pests* who *flood* the capital where they attack the customers of reputable businesses, and should therefore be *cleared off* or *removed* from the streets (Sunday Times 12.12.99, Fiji Sun 03.01.02).

I believe such vocabulary contributes to building a negative and dehumanised image of street kids. It makes it easier to view them as a problem for society at large rather than recognising them as very young people facing very real problems. Viewing them in this way can both legitimise and trigger calls for specific actions vis-à-vis the street kids such as arresting them for vagrancy or driving them out of town.

The Lord Mayor commented on street people in aesthetic terms in the lead up to the new millennium. As the closest capital city to the International Dateline, Suva would be the first in the world to see the sun rise on the new millennium and for this reason it was anticipated that global attention would be focused on Fiji. Suva became the "Millennium City." The Lord Mayor at the time said "We will live up to the name through our beautification projects. Nonetheless, the issue of beggars and street kids is of concern to us" (Sunday Times 12.12.99).

He stated the council was concerned because the street kids and beggars not only spoiled the image they were trying to project, but also behaved in an unruly manner. By discussing street kids and beggars in this way he is defining them in terms of being a problem rather than having a problem. The council proposes that the problem should be dealt with by establishing legislation to "take care of" street people. Despite discussing street people in terms of them being a problem the council also acknowledges that "if the social services had done something we wouldn't have this (problem) today." Here at least is some acknowledgement that a social approach is needed. It is also one of many examples of one agency criticising another's

handling of issues related to street people. Previously I have commented on Social Welfare Department attempts to transfer the responsibility of street people to the police and NGOs. The Lord Mayor on the other hand makes it clear that he thinks the Social Welfare Department has not done enough.

The opinion poll and the games

Wardhaugh (2000) notes that the desire to get rid of street youth fluctuates. In this regard the negative focus on street people in Fiji peaked in the months leading up to the 2003 South Pacific Games which were hosted by Fiji. This is the largest and arguably most important sporting event in the Pacific region. In the months preceding the games the newspapers regularly contained reports about a police campaign directed at street people. The aim of the campaign was to rid the streets of Suva of unsightly street people. These stories focused particularly on prostitutes who were being arrested for soliciting/loitering. During this period the street boys also experienced a dramatic increase in what they described as Police harassment. Alongside all of this was a debate in the local press which discussed why people are street people and what to do with them.

A Tebbutt/Fiji Times opinion poll published 07.01.2003, asked 1000 respondents by way of personal interviews whether “beggars should be cleared out of the streets, what proportion of the beggars they thought to be genuinely desperate and needing to beg to survive” and whether “the responsibility for looking after those who are believed to

be genuinely desperate lay with the family or the government". The discussion below is concerned with the first question.

In total the poll showed that 66% of the respondents thought that beggars should be cleared off the streets. I believe the wording of this question is rather confrontational. Clearing out brings to mind cleaning, tidying and getting rid of something, much like removing a stain, ridding yourself of junk from the basement or a shop having a liquidation sale. The vocabulary in the poll is matched by that found in the article presenting the poll titled "Keep beggars off the street", which uses words such as "remove" and "chase away" when discussing the poll results.

The Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA) responds to the poll and article by asking whether there might be ulterior motives behind the poll (Fiji Times 09.01.03). They speculate whether the poll's first question was "designed to trigger a certain response", and suggest that the poll may be used in support of proposals to rid Suva of street people prior to the South Pacific games. A further point made by ECREA is that a closed question poll is not a good starting point for a discussion on street people. They suggest that instead street people, police, and welfare organisations should be interviewed in depth. Whether or not the result of the poll had anything to do with it is hard to say, but ECREA proved to be correct in that a clean up campaign commenced soon afterwards.

The Lord Mayor responded to ECREA's comments about the poll in an article titled "Mayor begs to differ over the poor" (Fiji Times 11.01.03). He is quoted as saying "the beggars on Suva's streets must be removed before the official opening of the South Pacific Games". Presenting a positive image of Fiji was particularly important during

this period considering the number of international visitors and the level of media attention, and this could have triggered the Lord Mayor's response.

I will not speculate as to whether there were any sinister motives behind this poll. But what I do agree with is that the wording may have affected the outcome of the poll, to the beggars' detriment. By this I mean that the phrasing of the first question may have dehumanised the beggars in the minds of the respondents. They are not encouraged to reflect on how this clearing out is to take place and what will happen to the beggars once they have been "cleared out". On the surface it might seem as if the respondents support spatial purification strategies aimed at removing street people from sight. However, day to day conversations with Fiji Islanders may reveal a greater concern for street people as fellow human beings facing challenging circumstances than is indicated by this poll. The respondents would not necessarily approve of or see the value in strategies such as loading street people in trucks and dumping them somewhere out of town.

Street life

Identity and everyday relationships

As discussed in the last chapter, Wardhaugh (2000) argues that by excluding people from space we reinforce the stigma felt by those who are chased away from or not granted access to a particular space. Davis who has lived and worked in Fiji makes a similar observation when he says that "People's self image and confidence in their

abilities stems to a large extent from how other people respond to them." (1986, 134). He argues that people often believe in and act out the image that has been attached to them by society at large. He also says there is a stigma attached to being a young Fijian male. They are expected to be unruly. It is as if the street kids in Fiji experience the multiple stigma of being young, male, and Fijian. and in the wrong place, which is on the street. In addition street kids are different because they have severed their ties with family, kin and village, bonds that are considered extremely important in Fijian cultural terms. They are in the wrong place, which is on the street.

The boys had regular customers and acquaintances who sometimes dropped by for a chat or who said a friendly hello as they passed. Others were not so friendly and yet others were downright scared. One boy said: "People look down on us. They come from this little place and don't know better. They think we are just bad and they don't see the whole person. They know that we pick-pocket sometimes. You know us and understand that we are more than that".

I mentioned in a previous chapter that street culture with its alternative values can create further distance between street children and the mainstream society around them (Beazley 1998). Davis (1986) argues that street kids in Fiji can develop a kind of "perverted pride" where their reputation within the peer group may depend on participation in activities that reinforce their low status in the eyes of others. Taking part in criminal acts is an obvious example. Davis also notes that street kids said things such as "we are bad boys we are shoe shine". The comment was made in a joking manner but still repeated

the stereotype that other people attach to them. The boys made similar jokes around me about how cheeky they were and how they were “mini-gangsters”. However, on separate occasions two different boys on a serious note said to me something to the effect of “we are not that cheeky”. I gathered from their faces and tone of voice that it was important for them to tell me this.

Leaving the streets

Beazley (1998) found that many older street youth in Yogyakarta adopted the values of mainstream culture and wished they were like “everybody else”. Many boys told me that they wanted to leave street life. No boy ever said that he did *not* want to leave. In this regard, they didn’t fit the stereotype of street kids not thinking about tomorrow. Several boys expressed a longing to get organised and to stop spending money unwisely on things such as alcohol and taxis. One particular boy said that his relatives saw him as an outcast and for him it was important to show them he could make it, that he could have a job and look after a family. Most often they simply seemed sick of it all, particularly the constant hassling from the police.

Finding a way out and a viable alternative to living and working on the streets were of course a different matter than wanting to leave. Several boys said that breaking up with the other boys was a prerequisite for changing their lives. Many also stressed that a different job was necessary. This strengthens my belief that this is essentially a problem of lack of opportunity. Not many boys and

young men would be on the streets if they saw other options, regardless of how “adventurous” their minds are.

I have already mentioned that one boy had moved back to his parents again after five years away. He came across as being tired of street life. Despite this he still worked as a shoe shiner and this way kept in touch with the street kids. He saw this contact as unfortunate: “My mother says don’t follow the street kids, I say give me a job and I won’t follow the street kids.” He had previously been caught for robbery but being underage he was sent to youth detention rather than prison. If he now should be tempted to cross the line again he would definitely face the prospect of prison. Perpetrators of even petty crime can expect a tough response from the courts. As an example a shoe shiner, who I didn’t know, was sentenced to four years imprisonment for robbery with violence. This involved grabbing a taxi driver by the neck from the back seat of the taxi and stealing US \$25 (Fiji Sun 11.03.04).

There were no government programmes for street kids who wanted to lift themselves out of the situation. Nor were there any sustained, holistic programmes offered by aid organisations. Street kids who wanted a new start were very much left to their own devices if reuniting with their family was out of the question. Some former street kids had been “promoted” based on good behaviour and luck from street kids to permanent boys at the hostel where they were living. This meant that they were guaranteed three meals a day and a bed of their own. A couple of former street boys also received sponsorship by benevolent individuals to attend school while still living at the hostel. These boys remain in an at-risk position as they

are still very much in the same environment, may or may not have a school to go to and very little money. Many other boys expressed that finding such a sponsor was their great hope. One boy, while still hoping for a sponsor, said when asked to talk about his shoeshine customers: "They always said they were going to pay our school fees but they never did." I heard anecdotes about former street kids who had made it into formal sector jobs. There is certainly hope but making it with so few options available and so little support demands a good serve of stamina and luck.

Summary - street kids as a social problem

The Social Welfare Department and Suva City Council tend to portray street kids as being rather than having problems. The Police display more pragmatism despite being the executors of clean up strategies directed towards street kids and other street people. ECREA, FCOSS and FWCC argue that street people are the end result of structural issues and that the authorities should address root causes instead of attempting to clear street people out of sight. Most boys would rather not be on the street but, while still hoping, see no other options available.

CONCLUSION

The authorities in Fiji most often portrayed street kids as people being problems rather than having problems. The majority of comments from the Social Welfare Department suggest that street people are not genuine. I believe this dichotomy between genuine and disingenuous street people is artificial. Such categorisation of street people overlooks the fact that individual motivation, family factors and structural circumstances are closely linked. As stated previously the “flight” threshold for a young person will depend on factors such as emotional ties and the level of actual or threatened violence within the household. Additional factors such as confidence, support from adults, perceived opportunities and how well he fits in to the school system will build the case for staying or leaving in the young person’s mind.

In this context, a single mother will be better equipped to take care of her child’s needs if she can count on the support of the father, her family and the government. A man with solid links to Fijian tradition and the subsistence economy might find it easier and more natural to look after a nephew than an unemployed urban man with school fees to pay. In real life the question of choice is not a clear cut one and each individual’s story is complex.

Portraying street people as disingenuous serves the Social Welfare Department's interests in that it allows them to absolve themselves of responsibility. Instead the issue of street people is talked about as a law and order issue and sometimes as a matter of pollution versus beautification. The actions that follow from the definition of street kids as being problems are focused on clearing them out of sight rather than on addressing root causes.

I believe, based on listening to many young boys and men, that being a street kid for most is a matter of lack of opportunity. They would much prefer to be somewhere else and instead find different outlets for their "adventurous minds".

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